



Ebook Lending: Asserting the Value of Libraries as the Future of Books Unfolds

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A statement that I've heard lately asserts that the need for public libraries will recede in the future once ebooks become the dominant media. Its proponents suggest that online outlets such as Amazon and Apple will obviate the need for libraries. I don't necessarily question whether ebooks will eventually prevail, though I think that it will take many years before publishers abandon the printed page. Even granting that ebooks will one day become dominant, I anticipate that librarians will continue to deal with at least some proportion of printed books and other physical materials indefinitely. But even in this unfolding realm that will increasingly favor electronic distribution of published content, I believe that libraries will continue to play a vital role in our society. We must be thoughtful and strategic regarding these issues. I hope that librarians develop and employ technologies that will allow them to use ebooks to fulfill their traditional roles as the move away from print continues. Throughout my entire career, I've seen libraries steadily move toward increased involvement with electronic and digital content. The rise of ebooks is just the latest chapter in the story.

The Rise of Ebooks

Ebooks have been a growing phenomenon for quite some time. I recall many

times over the last decade that one tech pundit or another has proclaimed the time of the ebook has arrived. Yet, I continued to observe that most people continued to read printed books and magazines—even technology-oriented professionals who would likely be early adopters.

But now it's clear that the trend toward ebooks truly has made remarkable progress. I noticed on a recent trip that the tables have turned dramatically. From first-class to economy, ebooks were by far more prevalent, with only a minority reading the analog versions that you don't have to turn off during takeoff and landing. Still, it's important to note that in the broader context of the publishing industry, ebooks remain a small but rapidly growing minority. The Association of American Publishers reports 6.4% of books were published in electronic formats in 2010, up from 0.6% in 2008, with some specific categories, such as adult fiction, seeing more activity with ebooks representing 13.6% (see www.publishers.org/bookstats/formats).

Bookstores oriented toward selling printed books are in rapid decline. In recent days, for example, the once-dominant Borders retail chain closed its remaining outlets. We can anticipate that sales of ebooks through online powerhouses such as Amazon and Apple will continue to flourish at the expense of brick-and-mortar establishments. Librarians must pay close at-

tention to the dynamics between the print and ebook realm or fall victim to similar circumstances.

Libraries Remain Relevant

In this context of dramatic change in the publishing industry driven by the impact of ebooks, librarians likewise face strategic challenges. Contrary to the view that librarians may become obsolete, I see great opportunities for them long into the foreseeable future, provided that the right tools become available to transfer the essence of what we have always done with print into the domain of downloadable ebooks.

So much of what librarians do involves services surrounding content, and there may be a greater need for

Most importantly, libraries must ensure that all members of society, including those not able to afford devices and subscription fees, have convenient access to books and other materials even as this transition moves forward.

Continued Role in Lending Econtent

It's essential that librarians find ways to loan electronic materials to their patrons. Low price points of selected materials through commercial ebook rental or sales channels do not diminish the need for free access to ebooks from libraries any more than discounted or used books diminished the need for libraries to loan printed materials. Libraries and bookstores have coexisted in the past and will continue to do so in the digital realm. While there may be some books available to the public through commercial online channels for as little as a dollar or two, it's hard to imagine that the full breadth of published content will be available at those low price points. The cost of the content as well as the delivery devices will impose barriers to reading to the less affluent public in the absence of libraries empowered to loan materials in all formats for free.

The concept of library loan for electronic content has become solidly established already. In the academic library realm, the shift to electronic delivery of articles in scholarly journals has run almost to completion. Subscriptions to packages of ejournal content have displaced access to print versions, allowing many to move their vast ranges of bound periodicals to off-site storage and reallocate the space for other purposes. Academic libraries have gone through enormous change in the way they approach their basic automation infrastructure to accommodate this fundamental transformation in the publishing methods of their strategic content assets. Electronic resource management, OpenURL link

servers, and article-level discovery services have become increasingly important technology components for academic libraries. The shift from print to electronic scholarly journals brought in a new set of challenges for academic librarians, but through investments in new technologies they have maintained their role in providing access, in many ways far beyond what was possible previously.

For public libraries, the immediate challenge lies more in the impact of ebooks than ejournals. While public libraries often offer some access to databases of ejournal content, their investments tend to be much smaller than research and academic libraries. On the other hand, public libraries have been much more involved with ebook lending services. Many have subscribed to products such as those provided by OverDrive to give registered patrons access to collections of ebooks. OverDrive, founded in 1986, has offered its ebook service since 2000, with an expanding set of titles, library management features, and patron features. Librarians pay a subscription fee based on the number of titles they license, usually scaled to the factors such as the population of their service area. The service allows patrons to read titles through their web browsers or to download to supported ebook readers. In addition to OverDrive, by now established as the leading ebook provider to libraries, 3M has recently entered this space through its Cloud Library service, which includes some interesting new features such as in-library ebook kiosks for search and download, a custom-built e-reader designed for library lending, as well as a growing collection of titles.

Taking Ebook Lending to the Next Level

As we have noted, ebook lending services have been part of library offerings for more than a decade. Yet, I see us in a relatively early phase of development

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them in a realm of digital delivery. In this electronic age, demands increase for core library strengths such as providing information literacy, helping students and researchers identify high-quality sources, and guiding readers to materials of interest. I also anticipate that physical libraries will continue as inspiring places for reading, writing, and reflection and also for collaborative study and positive social interactions related to learning, culture, and heritage. In this digital age, libraries will provide the technologies to consume and manipulate content that might not be available in every home or school.

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in this sphere of technologies and services providing access to ebook content. Just as we saw earlier that the total number of ebook sales remains a small minority relative to the entire publishing industry, ebook lending supplements, but does not yet displace, the overall volume of circulation transactions of physical books and media in public libraries. I am concerned whether libraries will have adequate mechanisms established to support them, once ebooks are the core of the collection instead of a supplement.

For librarians to strengthen their position in this unfolding future where ebooks will eventually dominate over print, we need to gain mastery of this media in both the delivery of access and related services to our patrons and in the behind-the-scenes management. Librarians cannot afford to lose ground in their relevance to their patrons or in their operational efficiencies as this shift transpires.

I don't necessarily mean these comments as a criticism of the existing ebook lending products that provide a valuable service to libraries. Rather, I offer these thoughts to push the expectations forward as these and other products evolve and to be sure that we are always thinking about ways to improve how we deliver and manage services related to this critical component of library collections.

When it comes to providing access to ebooks, I hope that librarians offer services for ebooks that meet or exceed those that they have traditionally offered for printed materials. Patrons should be able to search, browse, peruse, select, borrow, read, and return these materials. These features are mostly in place today and generally can be accomplished from the convenience of the web instead of having to visit the physical library. So far, so good, but in other areas, there's much room for improvement.

The development of the ebook component of library collections should

reflect the same care and control that libraries exert with their physical collections. While it's great to gain access to large numbers of titles through a single subscription, the ebooks offered should not have to be limited by factors such as which publishers elect to participate in business arrangements with

EBOOK LENDING SERVICES HAVE BEEN PART OF LIBRARY OFFERINGS FOR MORE THAN A DECADE.

aggregators or whether specific titles or authors are opted in or out of commercial business arrangements.

Library patrons expect to have potential access to the broad universe of published material. What's available on the library's physical—or digital—shelves will be limited, but patrons expect the ability to request any item of interest from the library and to have it delivered in a reasonable time frame through interlibrary loan services. Today, the availability of any given title within a library's ebook collection is not such a big deal since patrons can gain access to a print copy through the traditional mechanisms. But in the future where many titles will be available only in electronic form, these issues rise to critical importance.

For libraries to be successful in the domain of ebooks, we must master their delivery to the patron's e-readers or other devices. The processes available today are notoriously complex. It should be just as easy for a patron to borrow an ebook from the library as it is to purchase or rent one from a commercial service. The technical complexities of

digital rights management and the details related to user accounts, file formats, and other aspects of the mechanics of transferring titles from the library service to e-readers need to be automated to the fullest extent possible and made transparent to the borrower.

One of the key principles that I've observed in the realm of discovery services relates to the need to present the library's collection to patrons in a unified way. Expecting patrons to interact with different systems or applications for different kinds of content can be time-consuming and confusing. Ebooks should be offered as just one component of the libraries' broader collections rather than as a separate silo. Loading the MARC records associated with a library's ebook service is just a small step toward a unified approach to discovery that includes ebooks. It's also helpful to provide the same kinds of real-time status or availability indicators, enhanced content, and service features provided for other materials.

I'm also looking forward to the time when the full text of ebooks can be searched from the library's discovery service. The ability to search beyond MARC records has become a growing expectation with all types of content. The new genre of discovery services based on consolidated indexes, including Summon from Serials Solutions, EBSCO Discovery Service, WorldCat Local, and Primo Central, consists of increasing proportions of full text relative to citations or MARC records. Through partnerships with HathiTrust, full-text searching of book content has become possible, oriented mostly toward older monographs. The full text of more recent titles as represented in library ebook collections would be a natural extension to the full-text searching capabilities of discovery services.

In addition to a more unified approach to the way that libraries incorporate ebooks into their patron-facing discovery services, similar attention needs to be given to the behind-the-

scenes management of these resources. Integrated library systems, and the new platforms emerging now to replace them, should offer the same kinds of functionality to help libraries manage their ebook collections as have been previously established for print materials. The current approach where libraries subscribe to a single ebook service, licensed as a whole, needs to eventually evolve into a more sophisticated model that gives libraries very granular control of this component of their collection. Librarians, for example, should be able to select individual titles rather than purchasing generic collections in bulk. Library automation products need to provide a full range of functionality for ebooks, blending the existing features of the print-oriented ILS and the electronic resource management systems.

The shift from print to ebooks isn't just one of technology. More importantly, the legal framework changes dramatically. Concepts such as the first sale doctrine, fair use, and other rights enjoyed by libraries in regard to their print collections give way to terms of license agreements. I hope to see more generous interpretations of copyright law for electronic materials in the future. It seems clear, however, that librarians cannot take the legal and business environment of ebooks for granted and should advocate at all levels for equivalent access to electronic book content relative to print.

I've mentioned just a few thoughts and concerns that come to mind looking forward into a time, likely in the not-too-distant future, when ebooks play a much more dominant role than they do today. I'm also sure that there are

many other aspects of the problem that I haven't addressed. We've seen a great deal of activity in the development of library automation products and services in recent years. I think that it will be essential to incorporate new and innovative technologies that support ebook lending into library automation systems and discovery services as part of the strategies that will ensure the relevancy of libraries as yet another chapter of the digital future unfolds. ■

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